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SOCIAL COMPARISON, SELF-CONSISTENCY AND THE PRESENTATION OF SELF.

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DESCRIPTORS- *SELF CONCEPT, *SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT, COLLEGE STUDENTS, *SELF EVALUATION, INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP, COMPETITIVE SELECTION, GERGEN MORSE SELF CONSISTENCY SCALE, COOPERSMITH SELF ESTEEM INVENT.

TO DISCOVER HOW A PERSON'S (P) SELF-CONCEPT IS AFFECTED BY THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ANOTHER (O) WHO SUDDENLY APPEARS IN THE SAME SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT, SEVERAL QUESTIONNAIRES, INCLUDING THE GERGEN-MORSE (1967) SELF-CONSISTENCY SCALE AND HALF THE COOPERSMITH SELF-ESTEEM INVENTORY, WERE ADMINISTERED TO 78 UNDERGRADUATE MEN WHO HAD ANSWERED AN AD FOR WORK IN PERSONALITY RESEARCH. THESE SUBJECTS WERE THEN CONFRONTED WITH TWO OTHER JOB APPLICANTS, HALF WITH "MR. CLEAN" (WELL-DRESSED, WELL-GROOMED, SELF-CONFIDENT), HALF WITH "MR. DIRTY" (JUST THE OPPOSITE). THE SUBJECTS WERE THEN GIVEN THE OTHER HALF OF THE SELF-ESTEEM INVENTORY AND A FINAL QUESTIONNAIRE ASKING FOR THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF O AND OF THE SITUATION. ANALYSIS OF THE DATA LED TO THE FOLLOWING CONCLUSIONS--(1) IN ANY SITUATION (COMPETITIVE OR NONCOMPETITIVE), AN O WITH SOCIALLY DESIRABLE CHARACTERISTICS CAUSES A LOWERING OF P'S SELF-ESTEEM, AND AN O WITH NEGATIVE CHARACTERISTICS CAUSES AN INCREASE, AND (2) IN ANY SITUATION, SUBJECTS WITH A HIGH LEVEL OF INCONSISTENCY CHANGE THEIR SELF-ESTEEM MORE THAN THOSE WITH A LOW LEVEL. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE 1967 MEETING OF THE AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION (WASHINGTON, D.C.). (RD)

note

This is a slightly expanded version of a paper presented at the 1967 meetings of the American Psychological Association, in Washington, D.C. Slides were used in the A.P.A. presentation. Paragraph 1 of this paper refers to two of these slides. The first showed "Mr. Clean," who appeared well-groomed and was immaculately dressed. The second showed "Mr. Dirty." He appeared unshaven and wore a torn sweatshirt.

Paper presented at the 1967 meetings of
the American Psychological Association

Social Comparison, Self-Consistency and the Presentation of Self[1]

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How would you feel if you found yourself seated opposite somebody like this? Or, somebody like this? Would you compare yourself with him? If so, what would this comparison do to your self-esteem?

Ever since Cooley (1964) hung up his picture of the "looking glass self" and Mead (1934) figured out exactly how it worked (at least, theroetically!), it has become almost a truism to social psychologists that an individual's concept of himself is constructed by somehow assimilating the ways he thinks others picture him. The windfall of theoretical and empirical studies generated by the works of Mead and Cooley has overshadowed another important way in which an individual may evaluate himself; that is, by comparing himself with others.

According to Festinger's (1954) theory of "social comparison," individuals have a basic drive to test the validity of their notions about the world and about themselves. Direct, physical tests are often either impossible or very dangerous (as in the case of bombing China to see under what conditions she will enter the Viet Nam war). As an alternative, individuals will usually evaluate their opinions and abilities by comparing themselves with others in their social environment.

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The empirical literature on social comparison has had little to say, however, about how the characteristics of Others (O) might affect a Person's (P) self-concept. The present study, therefore, focused on the way the positive or

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negative attributes of an O who suddenly and accidently appears on the scene may alter P's feelings about himself.

When an average individual meets a person with very desirable characteristics, his own self-esteem may suffer. This is well-known to those who advertise grooming products on TV. A female viewer who watches the pretty blonde on her screen get all the men may well feel that she is a "loser" in comparison. To close the gap, she may immediately run out to buy the latest hair coloring product. On the other hand, when confronted with another person whose characteristics are considered undesirable in our society, an individual's self-esteem should be enhanced.

Our analysis thus far has ignored the problem of impression management. When a person describes himself he is not only evaluating his own self-esteem, but also presenting himself to an audience. Suppose that P and O are both applying for a job or vying for the hand of a fair maiden. In this case, P will try to present himself to the girl or to his prospective boss in as favorable a light as possible. If O has positive characteristics, these will pose a threat to P. He will then have to counteract them by showing that he has more of the quality in demand than O has. In a competitive situation, therefore, an O with desirable characteristics should cause P to present himself more favorably than he might actually feel. In a non-competitive situation, he may be free to define himself more honestly. Likewise, if O has negatively valued characteristics, P should have little need to boost his self-estimates, even if the two <u>are</u> competing.

In addition to O's characteristics and the nature of the situation in which P and O find themselves, P's personality may also play a part in determining the extent to which he modifies his self-image both overtly and covertly. Gergen and Morse (1967) have proposed that some individuals see the various

aspects of their self-concept as fitting together harmoniously, to form a subjectively unified whole. Others perceive a great deal of inconsistency between the various traits which make up their self-concept. Individuals with a high level of consistency should be loath to incorporate new and perhaps inconsistent pieces of information about themself into their already consistent self-concepts. On the other hand, those with a low level of perceived self-consistency should be more open to modifications.

In summary, we propose three hypotheses:

(1) In a non-competitive situation, an Other who has socially-desirable characteristics should cause a lowering of P's self-esteem, while one with negative characteristics should cause it to increase.

(2) In a competitive situation, the positive O should cause P to raise his <u>professed</u> level of self-esteem to a greater extent than in the non-competitive situation. The negative O should cause no more self-enhancement than occurs in the non-competitive context.

(3) Highly self-consistent subjects should change their self-esteem <u>less</u> than inconsistent ones, across all situations.

METHOD

Turning now to methodology, we wanted to create a high-incentive, "real life" situation, but one in which certain controls could be exercised. The 78 subjects used in this study were all undergraduate men who had answered an ad in the campus newspaper offering two jobs paying three dollars an hour for about 20 hours work in "personality research." When they arrived for their

job interview, all applicants were asked to complete several questionnaires in addition to a three page application.

The secretary seated the subject at one side of a long table and gave him the first set of forms. These contained the Gergen-Morse (1967) Self-Consistency Scale and half the items from the Coopersmith (unpublished) Self-Esteem Inventory.

On the self-consistency scale, respondents select the ten adjectives which are most characteristic of them--five from a list of 17 positive traits, five from a list of 17 negative ones. These can be seen at the top of this slide.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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These ten words are then listed down the side and across the bottom of this matrix, so that all traits intersect one another. The respondent rates the degree of inconsistency which he perceives between each pair of traits at each intersection, using a six-point scale. This scale ranges from "the two traits fit very well together" to "there is a great deal of inconsistency between them." The respondent's self-consistency score is obtained by simply summing these ratings; the higher the total score, the higher the level of perceived inconsistency. A high score on this scale, for example, has been correlated with low scores on the psychological well-being and tolerance scales of the California Psychological Inventory (see Gergen and Morse, 1967). For present analysis, subjects were split into high and low inconsistency groups at the median on this scale.

When the subject had completed this first set of forms, the secretary re-appeared to take these from him and to bring in another job applicant whom she seated opposite him. Half the subjects found themselves confronted with

Mr. Clean, half with Mr. Dirty.

Mr. Clean was immaculately dressed and appeared very well-groomed and self-confident. When the secretary seated him behind his application, he immediately opened his attaché case, pulled out several sharpened pencils and began working on his forms in earnest. P could see that he also had a statistics book, a slide rule and a philosophy text in his case.

Mr. Dirty seemed just the opposite. He showed up in a smelly sweatshirt, wore no socks and seemed somewhat dazed by the whole procedure. He placed his copy of The Carpetbaggers on the table in front of him and after stareing aimlessly around the office for a few seconds, began looking for a pencil, which he finally found on the table. Once he began filling out his application, he would periodically stop, scratch his head and glance around the office as if looking for some guidance.

As we said before, we also wanted to vary the competitiveness of the relationship between P and O. To do this, half the subjects seated opposite Mr. Clean and half those seated opposite Mr. Dirty found that he was applying for the same job as they were. Half found that he was applying for a completely unrelated job--one in computer programming.

The subjects had nothing to do but look at O for about a minute and a half, after which the secretary returned with a second group of forms. These contained the remaining self-esteem items. The "pre" measure of self-esteem consisted of the 29 Coopersmith items which P completed before O was introduced, while the "post" measure comprised the 29 he completed afterward. Half the subjects in each condition received one set of items first and then the other set, while the remaining subjects completed these in the reverse order.

After returning these materials to the secretary, all subjects were given a final questionnaire which asked for their perceptions of O and of the situation. I should mention too that we did actually hire two of the applicants (not necessarily the two who best confirmed our predictions!).

In summary, this study used a 2 by 2 by 2 factorial design. The independent variables were (1) whether O's characteristics appeared desirable or undesirable, (2) whether or not P was competing and (3) whether P had a high or low level of perceived self-consistency.

RESULTS

First, did our manipulations work? How did subjects perceive Mr. Clean and Mr. Dirty? On semantic differential items, they saw Mr. Dirty as significantly more sloppy, less intellectual and more unconventional than Mr. Clean. All of these differences were significant at the .001 level.

Unfortunately, our competitor - non-competitor manipulation was less successful. Although subjects could correctly report which job O was applying for, they <u>did not</u> rate him as significantly more of a competitor when he was applying for the same job than when he was applying for a different one.

Turning to the results, we can first see how O's characteristics and the competitiveness of the situation affected P's self-esteem. As we predicted, and as Figure 2 shows, an individual's self-esteem rises when he is confronted

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Insert Figure 2 about here

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with a negative Other and drops when he encounters an O with positive characteristics. The difference between self-esteem change in the two conditions is significant at beyond the .05 level, using an analysis of variance. Contrary to prediction, these results hold whether O is competing with P or not. The desirability of an Other's appearance does, then, seem to make a difference in the way a person views himself in a situation.

We can now examine the effects of self-consistency upon social comparison. If we combine the competitive and non-competitive conditions (and this is legitimate since we found no difference between the two), we see that subjects with a high level of inconsistency do indeed change more than those with a low level. This can be seen in Figure 3. The self-esteem of highly incon-

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Insert Figure 3 about here

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sistent subjects shows a much sharper drop when faced with Mr. Clean and a much larger increase when faced with Mr. Dirty than that of subjects with a low level of inconsistency. Unfortunately, the analysis of variance did not reveal a significant interaction between O's characteristics and level of inconsistency.

However, we can look more closely at this relationship by examining the correlations between inconsistency and change in self-esteem for each condition.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Table 1 shows that inconsistency is <u>negatively</u> correlated with positive change in self-esteem in the Mr. Clean condition. That is, the higher a subject's level of perceived inconsistency, the <u>less</u> his self-esteem changed in a positive

direction. When the competitive and non-competitive situations are combined, this correlation is significant at the .05 level. We find exactly the opposite relationship when Mr. Dirty is the stimulus person--a positive correlation between inconsistency and upward movement in self-esteem. This is significant at .05 for the non-competitive condition.

An equally important question is: How do these correlations between inconsistency and change in self-esteem for Mr. Clean and Mr. Dirty compare with each other? For the total groups, they are significantly different at the .03 level and for the non-competitive situation at .05.

In summary, then, there seems to be good support for our first hypothesis. In a natural setting, an individual is likely to compare himself with Others who happen to be present. If O's characteristics are highly desirable, P's self-esteem may drop. If they are undesirable, it may rise. This seems to occur whether O is a competitor or not, so our second hypothesis receives no support. Hypothesis 3 seems to hold. It was found that high inconsistency subjects showed larger shifts in self-esteem than low inconsistency ones. These results lend further validity to the self-consistency measure and show the importance of self-consistency in predicting various aspects of social behavior.

Before closing, we can, of course, raise the question of why we found no significant effects from the situational variable of competition. The most obvious answer is that our manipulation was not strong enough. Subjects correctly realized which of the two jobs O was applying for, but those in the competitive condition actually felt no more competition than those in the non-competitive one. In fact, on ratings of O, the only significant result was that subjects saw Mr. Clean as more competitive than Mr. Dirty, regardless of the particular situation. It seems as if the variations in O's character-

istics were sufficiently overpowering that the situational differences paled in comparison. I suppose that that's the cue for the usual hackneyed expression, "more research is needed here."

Figure 1

(a) Traits Forming the Self-Consistency Measure

List I	List II
Optimistic	Impatient
Studious	Worrier
Honest	Self-conscious
Considerate	Moody
Reliable	Rebellious
Kind	Immature
Sincere	Quick-tempered
Friendly	Easily influenced
Cautious	Lazy
Independent	Gullible
Practical	Envious
Happy	Often feel misunderstood
Sensitive	Disorganized
Tolerant	Guilt-ridden
Idealistic	Stubborn
Adventurous	Self-centered
Intelligent	Noisy

(b) Matrix for Self-Consistency Measure

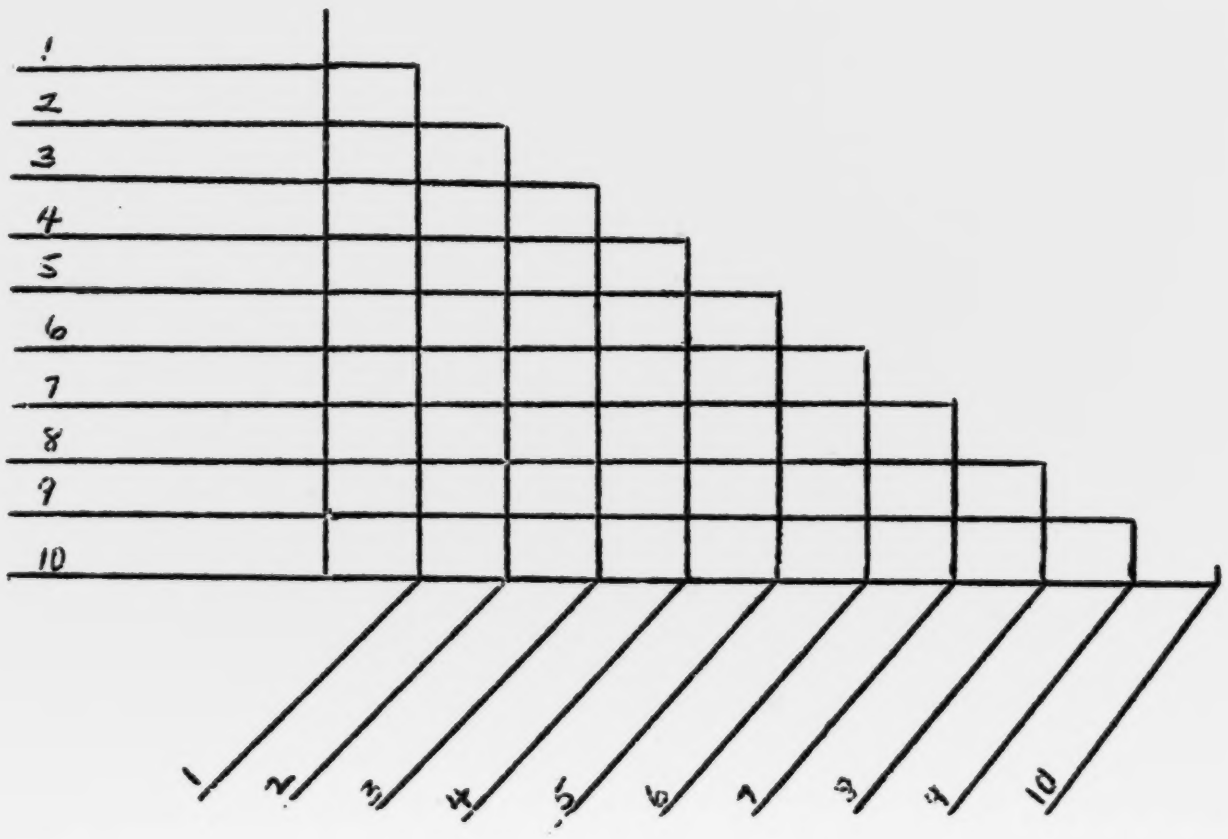

Figure 2

Changes in Self-Esteem as a Function of
Characteristics of Other and Competitiveness of Situation

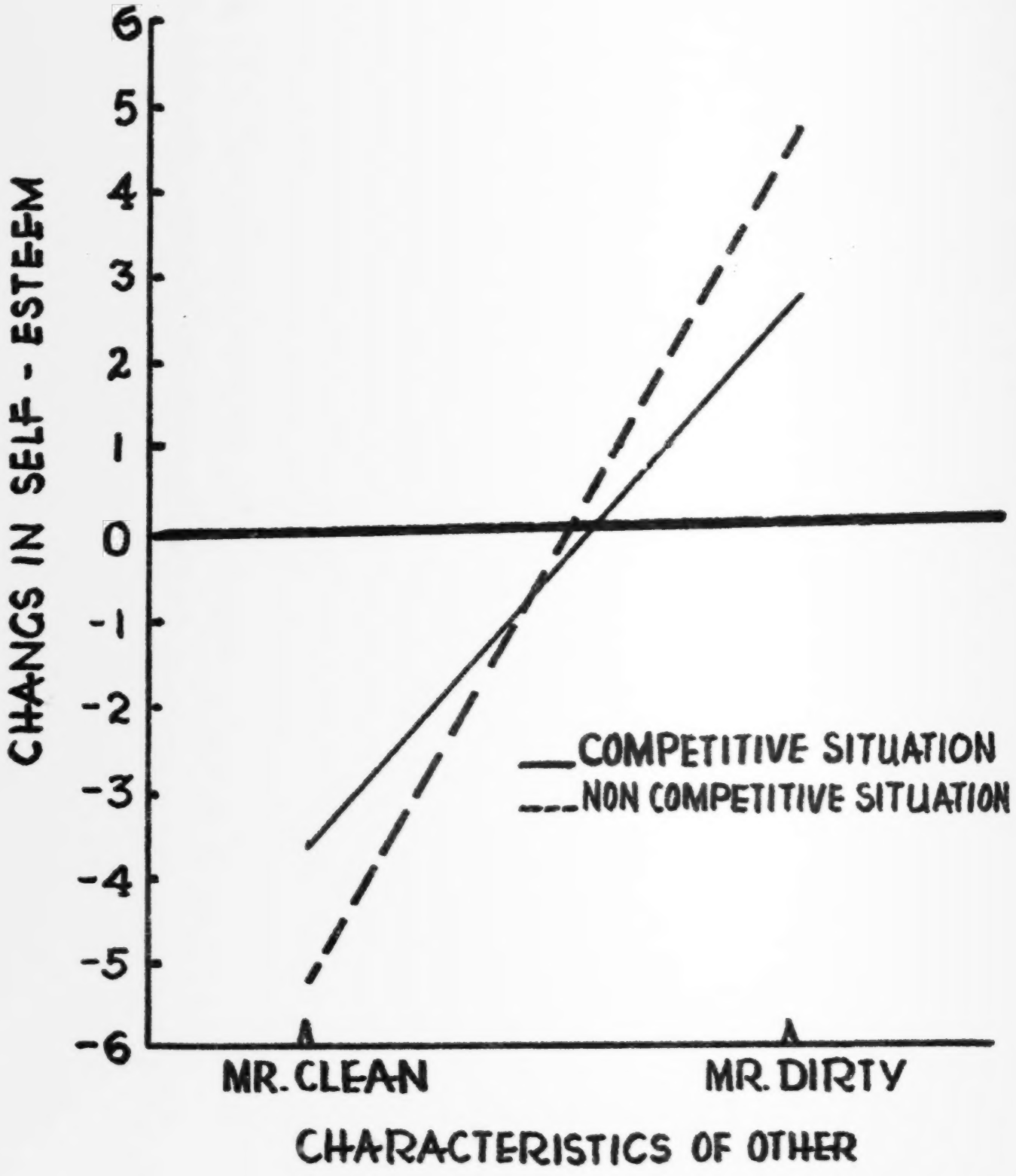

Figure 3

Changes in Self-Esteem as a Function of Characteristics of Other and Subject's Level of Inconsistency

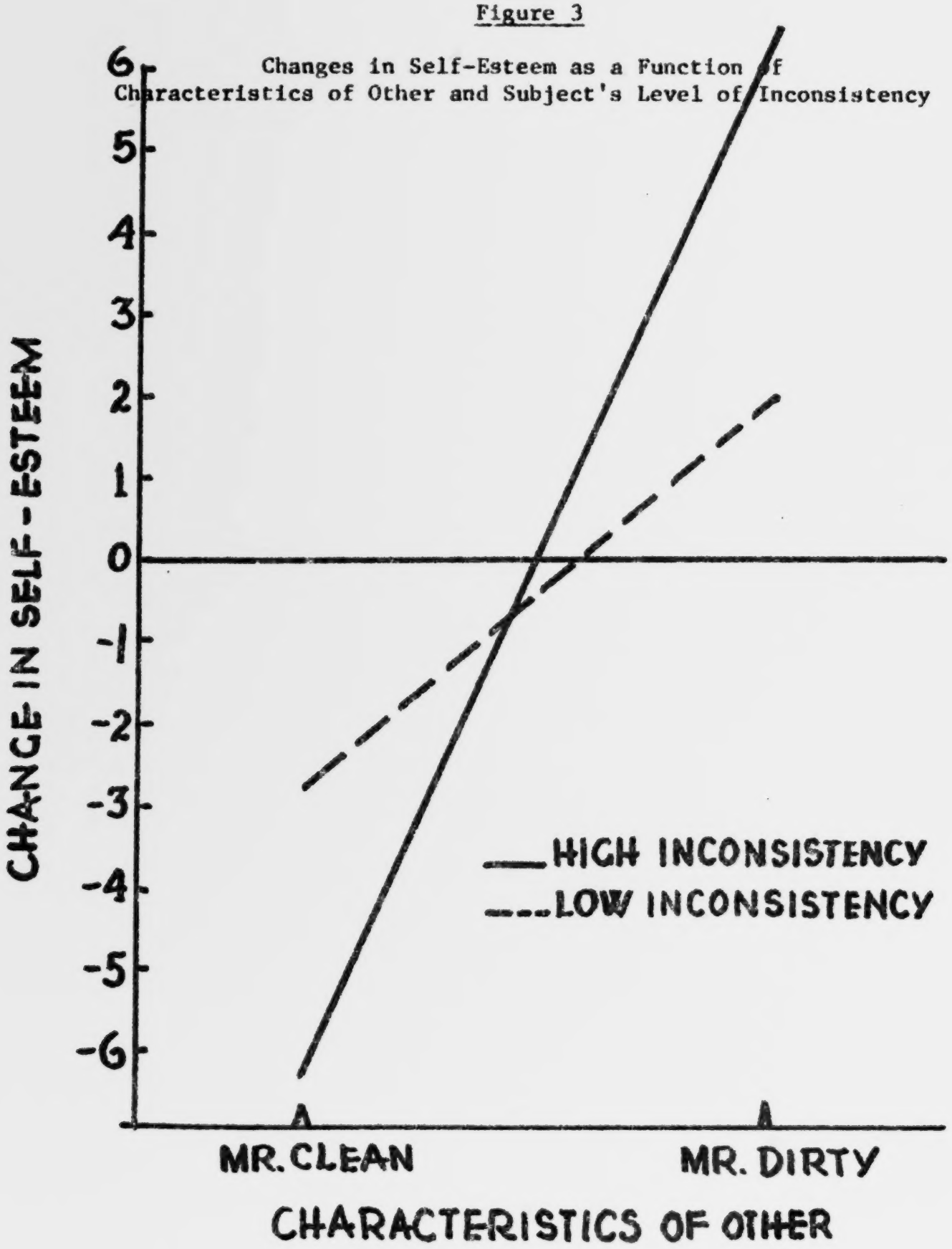

Table 1

Correlations Between Self-Consistency and Change in Self-Esteem by Condition+

	Competitive Situation		Non-Competitive Situation		Total	
	r	(n)	r	(n)	r	(n)
Mr. Clean	-.27	(18)	-.11	(19)	-.35*	(37)
Mr. Dirty	.02	(18)	.38*	(23)	.16	(41)
p of difference between r's	n.s.		$p < .05$		$p < .03$	

+ the higher the self-consistency score, the more perceived inconsistency

* $p < .05$

Footnotes

1. This research was supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation. We would like to thank Elliot Barden, Miss Barbara Cronk, Dr. Gerald Gurin, Alan Philbrook and Mrs. Judith Vartanian for helping in various ways with this study.

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